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Ideal Assessment for the Political Elite: A Lacanian Perspective

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Title: Ideal Assessment for the Political Elite: A Lacanian Perspective

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Abstract. This article advocates for the utility of two Lacanian personality constructs in the assessment of political leaders and the politically powerful.

How best to assess the personality of political leaders and the politically powerful? This question assumes that there is, indeed, something to assess. Personality is but a hypothetical construct and as a construct about people connotes that they act as if they possessed something called "personality." The something they may or may not possess is most often denoted as an intrapsychic and/or behavioral aspect of consistency that makes each person psychologically that person as opposed to someone else. This denotation covers a complexity of possibilities. For example, the consistency for a person may be an extreme inconsistency. Or what most makes a person that person, as opposed to someone else, may be that which the person in question shares with everyone else or with just some others or with no one

Although the ontological validity of personality is problematic, political psychologists still generate hypotheses about the personalities of political leaders and the politically powerful. And there are a myriad of overlapping purposes for this activity including quests to understand, explain, and predict intrapsychic and behavioral phenomena of the assessee. There are quests to understand, explain, and predict political events affecting multitudes through understanding, explaining, and predicting aspects of the assessee's personality. (There are also, of course, quests to obtain prestige, notoriety, financial gain, and satisfy a host of psychological needs--including self-knowledge--on the part of the political psychologist, but these are not the subject of this article.)

What kinds of personality hypotheses may be most valuable in the quest to understand, explain, and predict? Based on the epistemological criteria of logical positivism, one kind focuses on personality traits. This prepotency stems from a wealth of empirical and experimental data in the psychological literature often termed individual differences. Other hypotheses focus on life history data--events whose occurrence often can be easily supported through the assessee's self-report, the report of others, and various kinds of archival data. Still other hypotheses focus on metapsychological and psychodynamic constructs--some of which may be construed as traits--that seem somewhat farther removed in a nomological network from sensory data than both traits and life history data.

All three kinds of hypotheses continuously confront an essential question for political psychologists. How does one identify what psychologically is most associated and/or causally related to what is of interest about political leaders or the politically powerful to begin with? Huge indices of statistical significance may have little face validity or practical utility. Senses of resonance or empathy with a conclusion may seem fragile and may fluctuate through time due to factors having nothing to do with the assessee. Or these senses may become ever more ensconced in certainty even as they are evermore besides the point or plain wrong.

There may well be no way out of these complexities. Yet it is interesting that a theorist often linked with postmodernism and competing constructions of truth may offer a static, conceptual anchor. This theorist, Jacques Lacan, poses an essential dilemma for all humans: confronting a sense of alienation.

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This alienation stems from one's earliest psychological functioning characterized as (1) perceiving oneself to be fragmented and incomplete, then (2) identifying with complete images in the environment thereby being captured by the image, then (3) creating a sense of mastery and feeling of completeness over oneself, and as a consequence (4) constituting an ego (a falsifying ego) based on an alienating identification--i.e., different from what one really is. Nurturing false appearances of completeness, coherence, and meaning (of being more than what one is and of perceiving more than what is) is essential to attenuate alienation--even if this task is ultimately Sisyphean--and necessitates a paranoid stance as crucial to psychological functioning. Aspects of the paranoid stance include continuously (1) looking out for threats to constructions of false appearances and (2) sensing looking at oneself and sensing others looking at oneself in the context of how one looks compared to these constructions of false appearances. All of this constitutes an extremely tenuous self, a self under siege.

For the purposes of personality assessment, the Lacanian constructs of ego ideal and the ideal ego are crucial to managing the above human dilemma. Developing their content may well be essential in understanding, explaining, and predicting political leaders and the politically powerful. Here, the ideal ego is the false appearance one labors to maintain--e.g., as a consummate politician, as the anti-politician, as all-powerful, or as the nation's conscience. The ego ideal is that person or construction of a person or other image for which one labors to maintain the ideal ego--e.g., one's father, an illustrious national leader of the past, or God. Just as one example, developing the sexual aspects of ideal ego and ego ideal might help elucidate the propensity for so-called peccadilloes of political leaders and the politically powerful as well as the propensity for reporting them on the part of many Western mass media representatives.

Of course, the Lacanian dilemma suffers from insisting on a universal human dilemma that has its own ontological problems. But should one wish to refrain from psychological postulates until such matters are cleared up--a stance that poses its own problems? Perhaps, through faith in what seems worthy of attention and to avoid the despair in believing in some approximation of nothing, one may indulge in attenuating one's own alienation. Perhaps, the impression management, deception, and, yes, paranoia, intrinsic to a political career--in essence the career of us all--are but pale, surface versions of that most vital psychological dilemma described by Lacan. Discourse on this dilemma might not only prove entertaining for the citizenry but germane to the performance of those who affect the citizenry's fate. (See Gerety, C.A. (February 2001). Psychological constructs, dictators, and the world press.

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